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Mortuary Officials (*Talagh*)

The chief rôle in the mortuary rites for a *mar-sean* is taken by an official called *talagh*, whose main duty is the actual preparation of the body for burial. This man I will call the chief mortuary official. Certain other duties are performed by either one or more assistants, also called by the same name, whom I will therefore speak of as the assistant mortuary officials, though no such division of terminology exists in the native language. The word "official" alone will be used where the context makes it clear to whom it refers.

These men should be selected from among the members of the dead man's Lodge, but feeling is against the chief official being the own brother or son of the deceased. This may be because his intimate handling of the corpse would be too distressing to so near a relative; in any case, these relatives have too much to do to allow of their undergoing the confinement entailed. If a member of the dead man's own "Side of the Lodge" is not available for the office, then one will be chosen from the other "Side of the Lodge" belonging to the same Quarter.

All the mortuary officials sleep in the Quarter-Lodge (outside which the old man is buried) until the Fourteenth Day after death, when, after the launching of the canoe with provisions for the deceased, the duties of the assistant officials are over. The chief official remains in the Lodge till the performance of a special ceremony called *Tulagh*, or *Talogh*, when he makes his first public appearance and is paid for his services.[1]

Restrictions in regard to women.

There is no fasting for these men, but they may not have connexion with women for a year after the death of the old man, nor may they enter a woman's house (*ne-hims vavine*) during this period. During their fourteen days in the Lodge they may not be seen of women,[2] except by

years he had bled his fellow natives white by the practice of magic to obtain rain and wind. . . .

"He sent in his account in the form of a cycas leaf to all those concerned, who hastened to do him satisfaction by bringing all those pigs that they had been owing to him for so long. Stretched out on his mat, with tenderly appraising eye he surveyed this fine circle of pigs tethered around him, each at its stake. . . ." (Godefroy, 1, 1933, pp. 245-6.)

[1] See pp. 555-6.

[2] According to one statement, this only applies to the chief official, the others being allowed to go freely on errands connected with their work. In Wala, none of them may be seen, except a special one called the "outside official," who maintains the necessary connexion with the outside world, such as going to the mainland to procure food for himself and his companions.

The only time when the general rule of seclusion is broken in Vao is when the mortuary officials (with the possible exception of the chief official) appear in public at the feast called *Matean*. See p. 548.

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those female kinswomen of the dead man called *vene na woroan*,[1] who have married into other villages, and who at the news of death return to the home-village and spend a large part of their time in the Lodge with the mortuary officials. Thus, the two categories of women living in their own village by whom they may not be seen are (i) the unmarried girls, and (ii) all the wives of the male members of the village, though this latter category includes their own mothers, who keep them supplied with puddings.

A further restriction which applies only to the chief mortuary official is the prohibition against eating anything that has been touched by women (except his "mothers," who supply him with food), and a reciprocal prohibition against any woman eating anything that has been touched by him. The first thing he does on issuing from his seclusion is publicly to touch the yams which are to be distributed to the assembled guests, in order to demonstrate the removal of this restriction.

Duties of chief mortuary official.

The main duties of the chief mortuary official are:

(1) to prepare the body for burial;
(2) to place the morsel in the mouth of the dead man during the first feast of communion with him before burial;
(3) to conduct the subsequent communion rites held daily at sunrise and sunset until the Fourteenth Day after death;
(4) to blacken himself on the Fifth Day;
(5) to remain in seclusion till the ceremony of *Tulagh* or *Talogh*, when he is paid for his services.

Duties of assistant mortuary officials.

The main duties of the assistant mortuary officials are:

(1) to dig the grave;
(2) to deputise, if he so wishes, for the chief official at the twice-daily communion rites;
(3) to blacken themselves on the Fifth Day;
(4) to remain in seclusion till the Fourteenth Day;
(5) then to swim out into deep water with the canoe laden with provisions for the dead man.

Death and Burial

When a *mer-sean* dies, a taboo is placed on the fruit of such tree as is in season at that time. It is applicable to both men and women, and is not lifted till the morning of the first anniversary of his death.

[1] See pp. 133-4.

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(There is no launching of a canoe, as is the case for an old man. The whole evening and morning ceremony gives the impression of something to which the young man is not properly entitled, an imitation of the rites due to an old man, to which the younger has no right, but which is tolerated by the community so long as it is carried out *sub rosa* and no traces of it are thrust upon the public consciousness. Thus, the hut must be built by the side of the road instead of in the dancing-ground; the cane thrown on the grave evidently represents the circular fence made out of canes erected for an old man; the crying four times followed by weeping may be in imitation of the fourfold cries and weeping at the launching of the canoe; lastly, the whole of the pudding must, in the case of a young man, be finished or hidden before dawn.)

Period of Mourning

The period of mourning (*taurean*) lasts for thirty, forty or one hundred days, or a year or longer, according to choice, all the dead man's kinsmen, both male and female, having to fast or abstain (*vel-val*) during this time from eating certain yams.

(This presumably corresponds to the taboo on fruit in the case of an old man.)

End of Period of Fasting

When it is decided to put an end to this period of mourning, a day is appointed for a rite called *nagham hinagh*. The immediate relatives of the dead man lay out fowls, pigs, yams, bananas, etc., in the house-enclosure and give them to all those who have been abstaining.

Other Procedure Omitted

There are no mortuary officials (*talagh*) in the mortuary rites for a young man, nor is there any *Bur-tambean* or *Tulagh* rite nor any anniversary rite nor any communion feast such as takes place after the death of an old man.

WOMEN

Women's Age and Degree Names

Age-grades.

All women are called *Vavine*, and this term is used in reference and address for all those who have not yet received complimentary titles in connexion with the Maki.